

Remarks of Edward Thompson, Jr.
California Director, American Farmland Trust
To USDA's Farm Bill Listening Session
Fresno, California
August 12, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Secretary. We appreciate your holding these listening sessions.

The main point I want to make today is that federal farm policy is not helping California farmers meet some of the most pressing challenges to their competitiveness in the global marketplace.

California has the strictest air and water pollution laws in the country. They are essential to keep this state and this country healthy. But they also represent a cost of production that growers overseas do not necessarily have. Funding under EQIP, for example, falls well short of what domestic growers need to remain competitive. And a more robust, flexible green payments program could be an even better way to meet this need.

California is also losing more, good farmland to development than almost any other state. It's not that development is bad. But it tends to get out of control when farmers see houses as their last cash crop. It's happening right here in the Central Valley, where 100 thousand acres were paved over in the past decade. The resulting land speculation is driving the cost of farmland above and beyond what commercial agriculture can support. That, too, affects competitiveness.

What California growers need is a viable alternative for recovering equity from their land. But here, too, federal farm policy is letting them down. The Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, which offers payments to producers for limiting development, doesn't come close to meeting the need. Nor does it provide rural communities with any help to plan for the future of agriculture in the face of relentless urban growth.

I could go on about how the needs of specialty crop producers have been largely ignored by federal farm policy. And how California as a whole isn't getting close to its fair share of taxpayer support for an agriculture that this country can least afford to lose.

But let me conclude by saying simply that American Farmland Trust intends to work for a better farm bill that results in a cleaner environment, greater competitiveness and a stronger farm economy. And we invite everyone who shares these goals to join us.

Thanks again.

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Statement of Benjamin L. Higgins, Executive Vice President, California Cattlemen's Association, to Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns

USDA Farm Bill Forum – August 12, 2005 Fresno County Fairgrounds Fresno, CA

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. My name is Ben Higgins, and I am here today on behalf of the California Cattlemen's Association, representing California's ranchers and beef cattle producers. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this event and comment on the development of the 2007 Farm Bill."

"California's beef cattle producers have a long tradition of producing healthy, safe food, making significant contributions to California's economy, and maintaining millions of acres of open space and wildlife habitat. However, if these same ranchers are to succeed in the 21st century and pass their operations on to subsequent generations, we're going to need policies which, among other things, better reward them for these stewardship efforts without compromising the viability of their agricultural operation."

"We strongly believe that the next Farm Bill should focus on enhancing and fully funding programs like the Grasslands Reserve Program, the Conservation Security Program, and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. However, this is not just a request for more dollars. We need USDA to work more closely with the agricultural community to make these programs more user-friendly. Far too often, good conservation programs have been seriously undermined by policies which preclude participation by interested producers."

"We could also use programs designed specifically to help beef cattle producers and others recover from catastrophic disasters, including wildfires and flooding. In working to assist our members after past disasters, we've often found ourselves in a position of trying to stuff a conservation program peg into a disaster assistance hole, and it hasn't worked. We could very much use a program specifically tailored to assist producers in rebuilding their livelihoods after these kinds of disasters."

"Our producers also need resolution on the debates over country of origin labeling and the proposed ban on packer ownership. We hope that USDA will recognize the desire by agricultural producers to differentiate their products from those produced in other countries, and work to correct some of the fundamental flaws in the country of origin provisions passed as a part of the 2002 Farm Bill. We also hope that USDA will continue to work to defeat any proposed ban on packer ownership of cattle."

"Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on the development of the 2007 Farm Bill. We look forward to working with you and members of Congress on these, and other issues critical to our state's ranchers."

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